

THE NUN'S CELL.

By H. SYMMES.

Every year, on the same day of the same month, a splendid equipage drives up to the ruins of the once wealthy convent of Manbuisson near Paris, and a tall, majestic looking lady descending from the coach enters the dilapidated cell of Correction, and does penance there for two hours. This cell of Correction is a small cavern, about three feet long, and but little higher than the ordinary height of a female; and as it is dug out ten feet under ground, neither the fresh air nor the light of day can penetrate it. The cause for the yearly penance of the stranger was long a secret to me, but at length I learned the secret from her own lips, having become acquainted with her in consequence of her fainting and being carried into my house as pastor of the village. I give the story in her own words.

"I was born at Beauvais—my mother died in bringing me into the world. My father, a gentleman of fortune, holding a distinguished position in the province, soon married again. My stepmother at first, occupied a good deal of her time and care upon me, but when she became a mother, she devoted herself to her own children and her pleasures, and I was totally neglected.

"I was just eight years old when my father was appointed guardian to a nephew, who had within a very few months lost both his parents. My cousin came to reside with us. The similarity of our tastes and a sort of melancholy common to both of us, together with a feeling of total isolation from the world, soon drew us toward each other with the warm and lively friendship of youth. We passed together all the hours we could steal from study, which fled quickly and happily away. This innocent affection alarmed not our relations, even at an age when it might change into a deeper sentiment. It was perfectly understood by us, that we should soon be separated, and for ever.

"My cousin had scarcely entered his eighteenth year, when one day my father called him, and announced that he had succeeded in getting him appointed as a volunteer in a regiment, which was about embarking for India, and that he must hold himself in readiness to join it the next day. My cousin hastened to acquaint me with the fatal news. We each wept, endeavoring to console the

other; he embraced me, and made me swear upon my missal that I never would marry another, at least till he returned. I swore to him—the next day he was gone.

"My turn soon came—my stepmother entered my room one morning, a circumstance quite unusual with her. She talked some time of the moderate fortune of my father, of the large family which he now had, and that as he had no fortune to give me, he had determined that I should enter a convent, and as he knew the Abbess of Manbuisson, that I should be there received. This argument was unreplied to by me, and eight days after I was removed to the convent.

"The usage at all the convents is, when a young lady presents herself who wishes to take the veil, to attach to her during her noviciate, one of the sisters to instruct her in the duties of the order, and be as a friend and companion, to paint to her in glowing colors the peace and sweetness of a religious life, contrasted with the disappointments and mortifications inseparable from the world. The companion and friend they gave me was called Sister Rose. Nothing could be more seducing than the manners and appearance of this interesting creature. To her, all the practices of religion seemed easy and acceptable, and she appeared a living exemplification of sweetness and virtue. Charming girl—dearest object of my heart's affections, long as life remains shall my bosom heave with fond and affectionate remembrance of thee. Born to an illustrious family, poverty had served her for a vocation as it did with me, and she also entered the convent in obedience to a father's mandate. But her sweet and docile nature was more pliable than mine. Her angelic face—her mild blue eyes—her quiet and impressive manner—in fact, every thing under the influence of her sweet voice, appeared like her own soul, tender and innocent, and at the same time that I detested the cloister, yet to live with her and near her, appeared the extreme of human happiness.

"She soon gained all my affection—all my confidence, and gave me in return her friendship, strong and sincere. We scarcely quitted each other. When I was separated from her, I thought of my cousin—but what had become of him?—dare I look back? Then the mandate of my father would present itself to me, and throw, as it were, an insurmountable barrier between us. Notwithstanding I saw approaching with considerable regret the moment when I should take the vows—it was in three months.

"One evening in the month of June, upon entering my cell, I found a letter upon the bed. At first I thought of bringing it unopened to the mother Abbess; but

when I had seen the address, I hesitated no longer. I recognized the writing of my cousin. He said that he had returned to France for the purpose of taking possession of a considerable property, bequeathed to him by his mother's brother, that when he arrived at Beauvais, he had learned the lot prepared for me, and that his despair was at its height, at the same time he recalled to my mind my oath, and prayed of me not to abandon him. All was prepared—if I would on the following Friday go to the Turret, (which you can discern from this spot) he would manage the rest, and we should quit France together; if I came not, he would most certainly blow his brains out under the wall of the convent. This menace to a young person, is at all times frightful; it was still more so to me, who knew so well the determined character of my cousin.

"This letter threw me into a disorder of mind, which you can scarcely conceive. I passed a horrible night—a burning fever devouring me, and at the same time my heart burst all restraint, and revealed to me its feelings. It was no longer, as I before conceived, the love of a dear sister which I felt for him, no—it was love—and love the most ardent and tyrannical. I cursed myself; the cloister, and above all, the barbarity of my father. Willingly would I have put an end to the agonies I was enduring, by dashing my head against the bars of my window.

"The next day, Rose easily perceived my altered appearance and manner, and affectionately demanded the cause. I showed her the letter of my cousin. She laid before me the precepts of religion—the grief that I should entail upon my father—and the dangers by which I should be surrounded in following to a strange country, a man who was not my husband. I said in reply, that I was determined never to become a nun—that I had been sacrificed by my father—that my heart was devoted to my cousin with more than woman's love—that if I did not consent, he would kill himself, and as to myself, that I should become mad and die of grief. Rose entreated of me to seek God's assistance and comfort, and to consider the subject calmly.

"Thus passed three whole days. On the morning of the fourth, Rose came to me with a more tranquil air.

'My poor friend,' said she, 'I perceive that the commandments of our holy religion, together with my advice, have not produced upon you the desired change, but I have thought of a plan which will, perhaps, conciliate both your love for your cousin, and the duty which you owe to God. You have only to appear what you really are, ill and feverish, and when our good mother sees that you are unable to eat as usual in the refectory, she will call me and desire that you have more air and exercise; she will then give me the key of the park,

as she always does when any of the sisters are ill. The day on which your cousin has appointed to see you, we shall go to the turret, the door of which is never closed, you will there be able to speak to him from the little window—tell him that you have not yet pronounced your vows, and that if he wishes you not to take the religious habit, that he must address himself to your father; and as your cousin is now rich, he will consent to your marriage. I feel,' said she, warmly embracing me, 'that you will leave me, but I trust happily, and without disobeying God—that thought at least will console me.' Such was the plan which the wisdom of twenty-two suggested, and which my ardent love for my cousin induced me to adopt.

"As Rose had anticipated, the reverend Mother noticed the alteration in my appetite and looks; she gave us the key of the park, and every evening we walked there. The fatal day, you may judge of our inquietude. Rose had maintained her usual calmness and courage; but I was more dead than alive. When we arrived at the turret, the door, contrary to custom, was shut, and just beside it a high ladder was placed against the wall. We did not know what to do, when my cousin appeared; he was about descending to us, when we threw ourselves upon our knees, telling him if he did so, we were lost for ever; he desisted, on condition that I would mount the ladder and speak to him. Trembling, I consented, but scarcely had I ascended to the top, when he seized me by the arms, and assisted by his valet de chambre, I was carried down the other side, dumb and half insensible with fear. Three days afterward we were in Holland, where we were married.

"My marriage has always been a most happy one, notwithstanding in the midst of the first joys of our union, one bitter and afflicting thought interrupted my happiness, and that was the fate of my cherished and devoted friend, Rose, who had doubtless been accused as an accomplice in my flight. To my unspeakable joy, I one day received a letter from her to the effect, that she was well, and still happy in the service of God; that outside the walls of the convent she had but one anxiety, and that was solicitude for my welfare; that for several days and nights after my departure, she had done nothing but weep for me, but that she trusted all was well with me, and that I was long 'ere this the happy wife of my cousin, and that as to her, to make my mind perfectly easy, for the penance allotted to her in consideration of aiding my flight, was but a slight one—in fact, no more than spending two hours, one day in each week in the Correction—that she considered the punishment trifling to what she expected it would be, a further proof of the goodness and mildness which at all times actuated the dear reverend Mother. That the first time she was placed in this penitential prison, she was much frightened, and wept considerably, but that

now habit had accustomed her to it, and she considered it small indeed, in comparison with the certainty of having added to my happiness; that daily her prayers were offered up to the throne of Grace for my welfare, and concluded by entreating of me not to write to her, or make any exertion to see her, as such a course would only aggravate her sufferings. Such was the substance of the letter of my beloved Rose, which breathed in every line the sincerity of her devotion and the warmth of her affection. I knew she made light of her sufferings, in order to lessen mine.

"About this time the Revolution was making great strides. In the autumn of 1791 we returned to France.

"We had just arrived at Valenciennes, in the beginning of October, when one morning, I read in the papers that a decree had been pronounced by the Assembly for the immediate suppression and confiscation of several monasteries, and amongst the number the Abbey of Manbuisson.

"I hastened my departure with a joyous heart, at the expectation of soon meeting my beloved Rose, and of offering her, in that world where she was about to find herself alone and unprotected, that home and that friendship which she had purchased so dearly. I arrived at Paris the 13th of October, and on the same day I was at Manbuisson.

"I cannot give you any idea of the feelings I experienced at finding the gates, which had been closed for so many centuries, thrown open to all who were disposed to enter. The church had been plundered, the tombs violated, the bones scattered about and profaned. But, oh, my God! a spectacle still more heart-rending awaited me.

"I called aloud to know what had become of the pious sisterhood, and was told that the only inmate that remained was the porteress, who now occupied the abbess' room.

"This woman immediately recognized me. 'What has become,' I eagerly asked, 'of my beloved and tried friend, Sister Rose?'

"At the mention of her name she became pale as death, trembled violently, and, without replying, she lit a flambeau, and looked amongst a parcel of keys.

"In the name of God,' I exclaimed, where is Sister Rose? Is she dead?

"Oh! replied the Porteress, 'come quickly—they have forgotten her!'

"And where? I cried.

"In the Correction, where they placed her on Sunday, just before the commissioners of the district came.

"Sunday!' I screamed; 'and this is Saturday!' To raise the trap, to descend the ladder, to open the door, was but the affair of a moment But, oh! how shall I describe the sight that presented itself. My God! how have I survived it?

"My fond and faithful friend had died the lingering and cruel death of starvation, and every thing around demonstrated the excess of her agony; her veil and her habits had been torn to tatters—her crucifix broken, and the poor unfortunate lying on the scattered remnants. I caught her by the waist, and raised her toward me. Gracious God, what a meeting! She was stiff and cold; her right hand had torn her bosom—her teeth long and white, which her agonizingly contracted lips made visible, were buried in her left arm, which she had bitten in many places. At the same time, her eyes, moveless and wide open, appeared to fix their gaze upon my face. The sight was too much, and with an hysteric scream I fell insensible, still holding her in my arms. They were obliged to use force in separating us, so firm and death-like was my grasp.

"The next day, when I recovered my consciousness, I found my husband sitting beside my bed. In a few days he had me removed.

"And now, Sir, you can well understand the deplorable event that brings me here yearly on the 13th of October. I come not to ask pardon of my beloved Rose for the death which I have given her. Oh, no! for certain am I that, in the midst of all her sufferings, her lips or heart never breathed a single malediction against me—but I come to pray to that God who withdrew her from me, that he may be mercifully pleased to unite us in eternity. I come again to see that garden, those walks, and that cloister, where together we have so often vowed eternal friendship; where together we have promised to participate in each others joys and sorrows —unequal participation, which gave to me all the happiness, while the portion which awaited my innocent friend was a cruel chastisement and frightful death."



THE LADY'S WORLD OF FASHION. 1842.